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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are interpretive keys to the text. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols that present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to reference (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal or figurative meaning attached to the object—above and beyond face value. Symbols are often found in the novel’s title, at the beginning and end of the novel, within a profound action, or captured by the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and re-interpreting the main symbols of the novel. By decoding symbols, any reader can reveal a new interpretation of the novel.

Frequently, the study of a symbol will shed light on an entire story, as is often the case with Tan’s titles. “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away,” for example, refers to a fable at the novel’s beginning where a beautiful swan is confiscated from a woman when she comes to America. With only one feather remaining, she is forced to remember all those she has left behind. “The Red Candle” of the third chapter refers to a custom whereby a candle is burned at both ends the night of a wedding—a symbol of the permanence of the marriage vow. And the book’s overall title, *The Joy Luck Club*, is a complex symbol, a group of women linked by fate, but also a common Chinese expression whose translation into English alters it.



Discussion Activities

“The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates”—the title of section two—is the name of a Chinese children’s book. The book warns of different dangers awaiting unsuspecting children according to their birth dates. The gates do not literally exist. They express the possibility of danger or bad luck in everyday life. Why does Tan use this symbol as the title of a section? Why is the number of gates so precise? Why should we see them as gates rather than, say, pitfalls or traps?



Writing Exercise

Copy Handout Three, “Ghosts,” and have students read it. An-mei Hsu says, “My grandmother told me my mother was a ghost. This did not mean my mother was dead” (p.42). Later, Lena St. Clair says of the terrors that frightened her mother, “I watched, over the years, as they devoured her, piece by piece, until she disappeared and became a ghost” (p. 103). A ghost, in Chinese culture, is a rich symbol, suggestive of multiple meanings. Returning to the text, write a short essay about Tan’s use of ghosts in the story. Does her definition shift from the Chinese mothers to the Asian-American daughters?



Homework

Have students read pp. 185-209. What lessons do we learn about translation in the stories that constitute “American Translation?”